THE SYMPOSIUM OF OLYMPUS

A Dialogue on Civilization, Power, and the Human Condition

In the Manner of Plato

"*The only sin is to stop asking. The only death is certainty.*"

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

SOCRATES — The Athenian, barefoot, his eyes bright with that particular madness that comes from asking too many questions

CONFUCIUS — The Master, his hands folded in his sleeves, his beard white as the clouds below

THOMAS HOBBES — The Englishman, thin and severe, his collar stiff, his eyes haunted by the memory of civil war

NEZAHUALCÓYOTL — The Aztec sage-king, his face painted with the black and red stripes of the poet

MOSES — The Hebrew, his staff in hand, his face weathered by forty years of desert

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI — The Florentine, his clothes plain, his smile thin and knowing

LAOZI — The Old Master, his presence barely felt, as if he were already dissolving into the Tao

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS — The Areopagite, his face hidden in shadow, his voice seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere

MEISTER ECKHART — The German mystic, his Dominican habit simple, his eyes burning with an inner light

DAVID GRAEBER — The anarchist anthropologist, his presence warm and disruptive

JAMES C. SCOTT — The political scientist, his eyes sharp with the clarity of one who has studied resistance

PLATO — The philosopher himself, his form more ideal than any statue

PROLOGUE

The clouds parted at the summit of Olympus, where the air was thin and the stars hung close enough to touch. A great circular amphitheater of white marble rose from the living rock, its seats arranged in concentric rings that spiraled upward into mist. No wind stirred. The light was neither dawn nor dusk but something suspended between ages—a pale gold that illuminated without warmth.

At the center stood a simple stone table, and around it, figures from every epoch of human striving had gathered, summoned not by any god (for the gods, it seemed, had grown weary of human argument and departed for regions unknown), but by the very weight of their own questions, which had finally grown too heavy for the earth to bear.

ACT I: THE GATHERING

SOCRATES

(the Athenian, barefoot, his eyes bright with that particular madness that comes from asking too many questions)

Friends! Strangers! Enemies, perhaps, though I hope not yet. We are gathered here because the earth below grows dark with confusion. Cities rise and fall. Empires claim the mandate of heaven, then crumble into dust. Priests speak for gods who may or may not listen. Kings build walls to keep out the barbarians, only to discover the barbarians were already inside.

I have asked many men what justice is, and received many answers. But I have never asked you—you who built civilizations I never saw, who spoke with gods I never heard, who ruled empires that swallowed my poor Athens whole. So I ask now: What is civilization? And why do men agree to live in it?

CONFUCIUS

(the Master, his hands folded in his sleeves, his beard white as the clouds below, speaking with the measured cadence of one who has spent a lifetime correcting the manners of princes)

Ah, Socrates. You Greeks ask "what is," as if civilization were a thing to be defined, like justice or virtue. We Chinese ask "how does it harmonize?" Civilization is not a definition. It is a li—a pattern, a rite, the proper way for father to stand toward son, for ruler to stand toward subject, for heaven to stand toward earth.

Consider the Analects: "When the ruler is personally upright, all will go well even though he does not give orders. But if he is not personally upright, even though he gives orders, they will not be obeyed." The city is merely the outward form. The ren—humaneness—is the inward substance. Without the rites, men are beasts. Without humaneness, the rites are empty show.

THOMAS HOBBES

(the Englishman, thin and severe, his collar stiff, his eyes haunted by the memory of civil war, speaking as one who has seen the wolf inside every man)

Master Kong, you speak of harmony as if it were the natural state of things. I have lived through the English Civil War. I have seen churches desecrated, women ravaged, children starved. I have seen what men become when the Leviathan sleeps.

Your rites depend upon the goodness of the ruler. But what if the ruler is a beast? What if all men are beasts? "The condition of man," I wrote, "is a condition of war of every one against every one." In such a condition, there is no place for industry, no arts, no letters, no society. The life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Civilization is not harmony. Civilization is fear. Fear of death. Fear of the neighbor. Fear of the chaos that waits just beyond the city walls. Men agree to live in cities because the alternative is worse. They surrender their natural liberty to a sovereign power—not because the sovereign is good, but because the sovereign is strong enough to keep them from killing each other.

NEZAHUALCÓYOTL

(the Aztec sage-king, his face painted with the black and red stripes of the poet, his jade ornaments catching the strange light, speaking with the authority of one who built gardens in the midst of empire)

Hobbes, you speak of fear. I have seen fear. I have used fear. My people, the Mexica, built an empire on the flow of hearts. We believed the sun would die without sacrifice. We fed the gods with blood because we loved the world and wished it to continue.

But I was also a poet. I built the gardens of Texcotzingo. I composed verses:

"I, Nezahualcóyotl, ask it:
Do flowers go to the region of the dead?
In the beyond, are we still alive?
We are only sent here to dream.
We are only sent here to awaken."

You ask why men agree to live in cities. I say: to dream. The city is a dream made stone. The pyramid is a dream made geometry. The sacrifice is a dream made blood. But the dream is real. Without the dream, the sun does not rise. Without the dream, the maize does not grow.

Your Hobbesian sovereign keeps men from killing each other. My priests kept the cosmos from collapsing. Which is the greater lie? Which the greater truth?

MOSES

(the Hebrew, his staff in hand, his face weathered by forty years of desert, speaking with the authority of one who has spoken with the Unnameable)

You speak of dreams, Nezahualcóyotl. I have seen the burning bush that is not consumed. I have heard the voice from the mountain: "I am that I am." Not a name. Not a definition. The refusal of definition itself.

My people were slaves in Egypt. They built the cities of Pharaoh. They lived in squalor, as you say, Hobbes—but not because they feared each other. They lived in squalor because they feared Pharaoh. Civilization, in Egypt, was a pyramid of backs. The many bent so the one might stand tall.

I led them into the wilderness. Forty years. No cities. No kings. Only the Law, given on Sinai. "You shall have no other gods before me." "You shall not make for yourself a graven image."

Do you see? The Law came before the city. The covenant came before the temple. Civilization is not the pyramid. Civilization is the agreement—the "we" that exists before walls are built. My people wandered in circles because they had to learn to be a people before they could learn to be a city.

SOCRATES

Moses, you say the Law came before the city. But was the Law not given to control? "You shall not"—is this not the first chain? The first wall?

MOSES

(His eyes flash)

The Law is not a chain. The Law is a mirror. It shows man what he is. Without the mirror, he is a beast who does not know he is a beast. With the mirror, he may choose to become something else.

ACT II: THE NATURE OF POWER

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

(the Florentine, his clothes plain, his smile thin and knowing, speaking as one who has studied power the way others study geometry)

Gentlemen, you speak beautifully. Harmony. Dreams. Mirrors. But I have read the histories. I have seen the Medici rise and fall. I have seen the Borgia poison their way to power. Let me tell you what civilization really is.

Civilization is the successful lie. The prince who appears virtuous while practicing vice. The priest who speaks of heaven while counting gold. The philosopher who speaks of justice while serving the tyrant.

"The lion cannot protect himself from traps," I wrote, "and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves."

Nezahualcóyotl, you fed the gods with hearts. But who chose whose hearts? The priests? The king? The mob? Power always dresses itself in religion. The Aztec sacrifice, the Christian crusade, the Roman triumph—they are the same garment in different colors.

LAOZI

(the Old Master, his presence barely felt, as if he were already dissolving into the Tao, speaking in verses that seem to contradict themselves)

Machiavelli, you are a fox who thinks he is wise because he sees the traps. But the true sage does not set traps, nor does he avoid them. He walks where there is no path.

"Govern a great state as you would cook a small fish"—do not stir too much. "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao." Your princes and priests and laws—they are all stirring. They are all telling.

The greatest civilization is the one that does not know it is civilized. The greatest ruler is the one the people barely know exists. "When the best ruler achieves his work, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'"

THOMAS HOBBES

(Leaning forward, his knuckles white on the stone table)

Laozi, you speak from a China that had already known centuries of war. Your "non-action" is a luxury of the stable. I wrote in the shadow of the English Civil War, when churches became slaughterhouses. Your sage-king is a fantasy. My Leviathan is a necessity.

LAOZI

(Smiling faintly)

And your Leviathan, Mr. Hobbes—does he not become the greatest trap of all? You give a man absolute power to save you from the wolf. But who saves you from the man?

ACT III: THE QUESTION OF THE DIVINE

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS

(the Areopagite, his face hidden in shadow, his voice seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere, speaking with the authority of one who has climbed beyond names)

Friends, you argue about civilization, about power, about law. But you have not asked the question beneath all questions. What is the divine? And if the divine is beyond naming, how can any civilization claim to speak for it?

I wrote of the Mystical Theology: "The cause of all is above all and is not. It is free of every limitation and beyond them all." We call God "good," but God is beyond good. We call God "being," but God is beyond being. We call God "one," but God is beyond number.

The Aztec feeds the sun with blood. The Hebrew receives Law from fire. The Christian worships the crucified. The Taoist dissolves into the uncarved block. Are these the same god? Different gods? Or are they all fingers pointing at a moon that cannot be seen?

MEISTER ECKHART

(the German mystic, his Dominican habit simple, his eyes burning with an inner light that seems almost painful)

Brother Dionysius, you speak my language. I have said: "God is a word, a word is a cry, and a cry is a breath, and a breath is air, and air is nothing. Therefore God is nothing."

But do not misunderstand me. When I say God is nothing, I mean God is no-thing. Not an object among objects. Not a being among beings. The ground of being itself. The Grund.

And here is the heresy they nearly burned me for: The soul does not need the Church to reach God. The soul reaches God by letting go—of images, of concepts, of the very idea of "God." The Aztec priest with his knife, the Hebrew with his Law, the philosopher with his definitions—they are all clinging to something. The true mystic lets go of everything, even the letting

go.

NEZAHUALCÓYOTL

(His jade ornaments clicking as he shifts, his voice suddenly raw)

You speak of letting go, Eckhart. But I have held the beating heart of a man in my hands. I have felt the warmth leave it. I have offered it to the sun. Was this clinging? Or was this the most terrible letting go of all?

We did not sacrifice because we were cruel. We sacrificed because we were grateful. The gods gave us the maize, the rain, the breath in our lungs. What could we give back but the most precious thing we had?

You Christians speak of Christ's sacrifice. One man, one time, for all. We Aztecs understood: the sacrifice must be renewed. The gift must be repeated. The cosmos is not a finished thing. It is a conversation that never ends.

MOSES

(His staff thumping the marble)

And yet, Nezahualcóyotl, your conversation required the blood of the innocent. My Law forbade human sacrifice. "You shall not murder." The gift you gave was stolen from those who had no voice in the giving.

NEZAHUALCÓYOTL

(Quietly)

And your Law, Moses—did it not require the blood of lambs? Did it not command the death of the Amalekite, man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey?

We are all stained, friend. The only question is: do we know we are stained?

ACT IV: THE CITY AND THE WILDERNESS

CONFUCIUS

(After a long silence)

Gentlemen, we circle a deeper question. Hobbes says civilization is fear. Moses says it is covenant. Machiavelli says it is successful deception. Laozi says it is forgetting. But I say: civilization is memory.

The rites are memory made action. The ancestor worship is memory made obligation. The Spring and Autumn Annals are memory made judgment. Without memory, we are beasts. With memory, we are human.

But memory can be false. The Zhou dynasty claimed the mandate of heaven from the Shang, just as the Shang claimed it from the Xia. Each memory serves a power. Each rite reinforces a throne.

So I ask you: Is there a memory that does not serve power? Is there a civilization that does not require forgetting?

DAVID GRAEBER

(suddenly present, though no one had seen him arrive, his presence anarchic and warm, speaking with the energy of one who has spent a lifetime studying debt and rebellion)

Master Kong, you have hit upon it. I spent my life studying the origins of civilization, and I found something strange. The standard story—hunter-gatherers to farmers to cities to states—is a lie. A useful lie, told by those who benefit from the state.

Göbekli Tepe. You know it? Eleven thousand years ago, in what you call Turkey, hunter-gatherers built monumental stone circles. Before agriculture. Before pottery. Before the city. They gathered, they feasted, they built, they dispersed.

What does this mean? It means ritual preceded settlement. Meaning preceded survival. The dream came before the wall. Your Leviathan,

Hobbes, is not the foundation. The festival is the foundation. The gift is the foundation. The play is the foundation.

And here is the heresy: for most of human history, people refused the state. They saw what we would become—taxes, conscription, slavery, bureaucracy—and they said no. They walked away. The "barbarians" were not primitives. They were critics.

THOMAS HOBBES

> *(His face reddening)*

Graeber, you romanticize savagery. I have seen the war of all against all. It is not a festival.

DAVID GRAEBER

And I have seen the state of nature, Mr. Hobbes. I lived among the Tsimshian of British Columbia. I studied the Iroquois Confederacy. I read the accounts of the Wendat, who laughed at the French for starving in winter while they feasted. The "savage" was not nasty or brutish. The savage was bored by our seriousness.

The question is not: why did men agree to live in cities? The question is: why did they ever stop refusing?

JAMES C. SCOTT

> *(another unexpected presence, his eyes sharp with the clarity of one who has studied the art of resistance)*

Graeber is right, and I will add: the first cities were not liberations. They were traps.

Wheat. The culprit is wheat. Rice, later. Maize, in your Americas, Nezahualcóyotl. These grasses could be taxed. They could be stored. They could be seized. The nomad cannot be taxed. The hunter cannot be controlled. But the farmer, tied to his field, his surplus visible and countable—he can be ruled.

The city is not the temple. The city is the granary. The wall is not for protection. The wall is for containment. The first states were not voluntary associations. They were population captures.

And yet—and here is the mystery—people did resist. For thousands of years, the hill peoples of Southeast Asia, the marsh Arabs, the Bedouin, the forest dwellers of the Amazon—they refused the state. They developed what I call the art of not being governed.

So when you ask, Socrates, why men agree to live in squalor, I say: most didn't. Most ran. The ones who stayed were the ones who couldn't run. The sick. The old. The unlucky. The captured.

ACT V: THE SYMPOSIUM TURNS

SOCRATES

(His eyes moving from face to face, his voice softer now)

We have heard much. Perhaps too much. Let me try to weave these threads, though I fear the tapestry will be strange.

Hobbes says civilization is fear, and the sovereign is its answer. But Laozi asks: who saves us from the sovereign? Machiavelli says power wears the mask of virtue, but never asks why virtue needs a mask. Moses says the Law precedes the city, but the Law was given by a voice from a mountain—was that voice not itself a kind of power? Nezahualcóyotl says the city is a dream, but his dream required blood. Confucius says civilization is memory, but memory serves the throne. Graeber and Scott say the first cities were traps, and most men refused them.

And through it all, Dionysius and Eckhart whisper: the divine is beyond all this. Beyond naming, beyond power, beyond civilization itself.

So I ask again, more precisely: Is civilization necessary? And if so, what kind?

PLATO

(the philosopher himself, stepping from shadow, his form more ideal than any statue, speaking with the voice of one who has seen the Forms)

My dear Socrates, you ask the question I tried to answer in the Republic. The ideal city, I said, requires philosopher-kings. The just city is the one where each part performs its proper function—the rulers with wisdom, the guardians with courage, the producers with moderation.

But I was young when I wrote that. Or rather, I was ambitious. I wanted to believe that reason could rule. That the philosopher, having seen the Good, could return to the cave and govern justly.

I was wrong. The philosopher who returns to the cave is killed. Or corrupted. Or becomes the worst tyrant of all, because he believes his vision

justifies any means.

The true city, I have come to believe, is not the one built by philosopher-kings. It is the one built by friends. Small enough to know each other. Large enough to defend each other. Governed not by wisdom imposed from above, but by philia—love, friendship, the bond between equals.

THOMAS HOBBES

(Scoffing)

Plato's friends! How many friends does it take to stop an army? Your city of friends would last until the first barbarian horde appeared on the horizon.

PLATO

And your Leviathan, Hobbes—how long did it last? The English Civil War ended with a king's head on a pike. The French Revolution ended with the Terror. The Russian Revolution ended with the Gulag. The strong sovereign is not the answer. The strong sovereign is the question that keeps being answered with blood.

CONFUCIUS

(Nodding slowly)

Plato speaks of philia. I speak of ren—humaneness. They are not the same, but they rhyme. The city of five thousand people, where the ruler knows the face of every subject, where the rites are lived rather than performed—this is the city I imagined. Not the empire of Qin, with its burning of books and burying of scholars. The empire is the cancer of the city.

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

(His smile widening)

And yet, Master Kong, the empire is the reality of the city. The city grows or it dies. The empire conquers or it is conquered. Your five-thousand-person utopia is a garden. Gardens are beautiful. But gardens do not decide the fate of nations.

NEZAHUALCÓYOTL

(Standing, his voice resonating in the marble circle)

Machiavelli, you are half right. The empire is real. But the garden is more real. Texcotzingo—my gardens, my aqueducts, my poems—they outlasted the empire. The Mexica empire fell to Cortés. But my verses are still sung. My gardens, though ruined, are still remembered.

The empire is force. The garden is grace. Civilization needs both, but if it forgets the garden, it deserves to fall.

MOSES

(His staff raised, not in anger, but in blessing)

Nezahualcóyotl speaks truth. My people built no gardens in the wilderness. They built only a tent—the Tabernacle, portable, temporary, always moving toward a promised land they never quite reached.

The city they eventually built—Jerusalem—fell. Twice. The temple was destroyed. The people were scattered. But the Law survived. The covenant survived. The memory of the wilderness survived.

Perhaps civilization is not the city at all. Perhaps civilization is the refusal to settle. The refusal to say "this is the final form." The willingness to keep walking, even when the promised land is always over the next horizon.

ACT VI: THE APOPHATIC TURN

MEISTER ECKHART

(His voice dropping to a whisper that somehow filled the amphitheater)

Moses, you speak of walking. I speak of letting go. The soul must become as empty as the desert. It must let go of God, of the Law, of the covenant, even of the walking itself.

"The highest and loftiest thing that one can let go of is to let go of God for the sake of God." Do you understand? Even the divine must be released. Even the name of the divine must be released.

The Aztec sacrifices his victim to the sun. The Christian sacrifices his will to Christ. The mystic sacrifices everything—including the idea of sacrifice. He becomes the desert. He becomes the silence. He becomes the nothing from which all things come.

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS

(His voice joining Eckhart's, a harmony of negation)

"Unknown, unseen, and incomprehensible." This is how I described the divine. Not because the divine is hidden from us, but because the divine is more than hidden. The divine is the hiding itself. The divine is the darkness that makes light possible.

Your civilizations, your laws, your sacrifices, your gardens—they are all lights. But light without darkness is blindness. The apophatic is not the denial of civilization. It is the ground of civilization. The silence beneath the music. The breath between words.

LAOZI

(Barely audible, as if he were already becoming the wind)

"The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao." You have all been telling. Even your negations are telling. The true Tao is not even "not-Tao." It is simply... this. The stone beneath your feet. The breath in your lungs. The silence after I stop speaking.

ACT VII: THE FINAL QUESTION

SOCRATES

(Looking around the circle, his eyes wet)

Friends. I came here asking what civilization is. I have heard that it is fear, and harmony, and dream, and covenant, and deception, and memory, and trap, and garden, and refusal, and letting go.

I am no closer to a definition. But I am closer to something else.

I think... I think civilization is the question itself. The fact that we are here, asking, arguing, disagreeing, dreaming. The wolf does not ask why he hunts. The ant does not ask why he builds. Only man asks. And in the asking, he becomes something more than beast and less than god.

But here is my final question, and I ask it of all of you, and of myself:

If civilization is the question, what is the answer?

(Long silence. The strange light dims. The stars seem closer.)

NEZAHUALCÓYOTL

(Softly, almost singing)

"We are only sent here to dream.
We are only sent here to awaken."

MOSES

(His voice rough with age and hope)

The answer is not given. The answer is walked toward. The Promised Land is not a place. It is the walking.

PLATO

The answer is not in the city. It is in the friendship that makes the city possible.

THOMAS HOBBES

(Reluctantly, as if the words cost him)

The answer is... that we keep trying. Even knowing the Leviathan will fail. Even knowing the sovereign will become the wolf. We keep trying because the alternative is the war of all against all. And that war has no answer at all.

CONFUCIUS

The answer is the junzi—the superior person—who acts from ren without expecting reward. Who performs the rites not because they are enforced, but because they are beautiful. The answer is the person who makes civilization civilized, one gesture at a time.

DAVID GRAEBER

The answer is that we remember we can refuse. That the first act of civilization is not building walls, but tearing them down. That the festival precedes the state. That play is older than power.

JAMES C. SCOTT

The answer is that most people, through most of history, have chosen to run. And that choice was not stupidity. It was wisdom.

MEISTER ECKHART

The answer is that there is no answer. And in that no-answer, we find the divine.

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS

The answer is the darkness beyond the names. The silence beyond the music. The nothing that is the source of all.

LAOZI

(Already dissolving into mist)

The answer is the uncarved block. The empty bowl. The valley that holds the river. The answer is...

(He is gone. Only the wind remains.)

SOCRATES

(Alone now, or so it seems. The others have faded like dreams at dawn. He speaks to the empty amphitheater, to the stars, to himself.)

Then I will keep asking. I will keep walking. I will keep dreaming, and awakening, and dreaming again.

For if the answer is the question, then the only sin is to stop asking. The only death is certainty. The only tyranny is the belief that we have arrived.

(He turns and walks toward the edge of Olympus, where the clouds part to reveal the earth below—a patchwork of cities and wilderness, of walls and gardens, of blood and beauty, of memory and forgetting. He does not look back.)

The light changes. Dawn, perhaps. Or something older.

FINIS

EPILOGUE: FOR THE READER

The figures in this dialogue are, like Plato's own, both real and imagined. They speak truths their historical selves might not have recognized, and remain silent on matters their historical selves might have insisted upon. This is the nature of the symposium: not history, but philosophy—the love of wisdom, which is always a love of what we do not yet possess.

The questions raised here have no final answers. That is their virtue. Civilization, power, the divine, the self—these are not problems to be solved but mysteries to be inhabited. The Aztec sacrifice and the Christian Eucharist, the Hobbesian sovereign and the Laozian sage, the Confucian rite and the Eckhartian abyss—these are not contradictions to be resolved but perspectives to be held in tension, like a chord that requires dissonance to achieve its full resonance.

The reader who seeks certainty will find none here. The reader who seeks companionship in uncertainty will find, perhaps, a friend.

Written in the manner of Plato, with apologies to all who spoke and all who were silent.